

Book Review

Christina Johansson & Pieter Bevelander (eds.) *Museums in a time of migration: Rethinking museums' roles, representations, collections, and collaborations*, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2017. ISBN 9789188168825. 262 pages. 229 kr.

In the autumn of 2015, Sweden, a country of 10 million inhabitants, welcomed over 150 000 refugees. The vast majority of them arrived in the city of Malmö. It was an historic event in the history of Swedish migration, the largest movement of people since the emigration crisis of one hundred years earlier, when more than a quarter of Sweden's population had left for the Americas.

Malmö has plans for a new museum of democracy and migration. *Museums in a time of migration* is the result of a conference that 'sought to lay the scholarly foundations' for this project (Johansson & Bevelander 2017: 10).¹ It is an edited volume of conference papers. Something that seldom makes for readable books, as the content tends to be at the same time repetitive and disparate. Here, however, is a book that reads well in one continuous flow. The individual chapters build a joint narrative as the different authors contribute with well-cut pieces for a joint mosaic. The book thus is a welcome contribution to recent works such as the edited volumes from the Italian project *European Museums in an age of migration* (Pressaut et al. 2013), *Museums and Migration* (Gourivédès 2014) and *Museums, migration and identity in Europe* (Whitehead et al. 2015), adding more recent migration studies theory, whilst keeping close to museum practice.

Theory, empirical investigations and practical reflections are interlaced, offering a direct usability for concrete measures to improve both institutional structures and daily routines within museums. How can museums prepare and rapidly respond, documenting acute situations like the autumn of 2015 in Malmö?

In the introduction Christina Johansson and Pieter Bevelander give a concise and pedagogical introduction to the field of migration studies, further developed in Maja Povrzanović Frykman's reflections on some central concepts in the field – ethnicity, identity, culture and diversity. The introduction also surveys the existing literature on museums and migration, positioning itself in its attachment to the 'mobility turn' in social sciences, which entails not only a reinterpretation of migration, but a new view of society as such.² This exposes the dominant privileging of production, dwelling and belonging in museum narratives, at the expense of exchanges and mobility.

The introduction develops some key distinctions in migration research: between international and national migration, voluntary and forced, permanent-temporary and legal-illegal migration, as well as between studying migration as a process or studying the outcomes of migration for individuals and society.

The uncritical treatment of society as a stable entity is shown to have major impacts on everything from collecting to exhibition making. All too often, museums focus on the 'insiders' history, depicting emigrants and immigrants as anomalies. The contributions to the book support each other's perspective in an unusually efficient and thoughtful way. They emphasize the importance of keeping geopolitical structures in mind when talking about migration. Bernadette Lynch argues convincingly that museums tend to present migrants' situation as personal traumas rather than effects of political structures. Such benevolent attempts to address the plights of refugees often hide the political utterance of these voices, turning them into passive victims rather than residents with legitimate and urgent demands for justice. For nuance,

Lynch's critical view is supplemented by Johansson's detailed depiction of a role play about flight at Kalmar County Museum. It shows that it is also important to convey insights into the trauma of forced migration, while addressing the risks of this perspective in a nuanced manner.

Malin Thor Tureby and Jesper Johansson give a close description of how the Nordic Museum's archives and collections have produced a narrow ethnic 'Swedishness'. Their longer historical scope and broader focus on minorities, rather than migrants, disturbs the coherence of the book's theme, opening up to a whole host of other questions about museums and normativity. Fredrik Svanberg follows a similar line in his discussion of how exclusive national and collective categories hide movements and the inherent diversity of objects in a more general way. This broadening of the theme is re-connected to museums handling of migration in the chapters by Bernadette Lynch, Christina Johansson and Peggy Lewitt in different ways showing how museums' willingness to give voice to the excluded risks enhances the notion of a static national society that should tolerate and help 'weak and marginalized others'. Thereby, we learn that representations of migration cannot be studied only from a mobility perspective, but also connects to broader themes of exclusion and marginalization.

Dragan Nikolić from Skåne County Museum provides inspiring insights and analyzes of local Malmö projects to document the experiences of the exceptional autumn of 2015 when people mobilized to meet a large number of arriving refugees. Parvin Ardalan, who came to Malmö from Iran as an author at risk within the International cities of refuge network, describes the feminist *Women telling herstory* project, a grassroots level collection of stories about immigrant women's contribution to Malmö's history over 100 years. Their chapters can almost be read as manuals and guidelines for museums that intend to take on the well-argued task of challenging the dominant nationalist and ethnocentric histories. Concrete examples on how oral history and life stories can challenge one-dimensional representations of migrants are given in Alistair Thomson's chapter about two British women migrating to Australia. Benita Bonham's and David Fleming's respective reflections on the local District Six Museum in South Africa, and National Museums Liverpool, work to highlight local history and its links with global and colonial structures.

Museums in a time of migration convincingly shows the need for reflective practice in close contact with current academic theoretical developments. Museums and universities need each other in order to build sustainable and equitable knowledge about society. The book's blend of contributions from university researchers and museum practitioners not only argues for cooperative knowledge building, it is an outstanding example of its fertility. The irreplaceable role of museums as agents for documenting contemporary society offers a strong argument for their political relevance, and not only for the planned museum in Malmö.

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Notes

- ¹ The conference was held at Malmö University, 25-26th of May 2016, and was opened by the Swedish Minister of Culture and Democracy, Alice Bah Kuhnke. <https://www.mah.se/english/research/Centers/Malmo-Institute-for-Studies-of-Migration-Diversity-and-Welfare/News/Former-MIM-events-and-conferences/Museums-in-Times-of-Migration-and-Mobility/>
- ² See the journal *Mobilities* established in 2006. The journal 'stands as a testament to John Urry's pioneering work and leadership in the "new mobilities paradigm" in social science research'. <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rmob20/current>

References

- Gouriévidis, L. (ed.) (2014) *Museums and migration: History, memory and politics*, Oxford: Routledge.
- Peressut, L. B., Lanz, F. & Postiglione, G. (eds.) (2013) *European Museums in the 21st Century: Setting the framework*, vol 1-3, Milano: Mela Books.

Whitehead, K. Lloyd, S., Eckersley, S. & Mason, R. (eds.) (2015) *Museums, migration and identity in Europe: Peoples, places and identities*, Farnham: Ashgate.